

Seal shooting: Scottish Government caught trying to shield salmon farming from US ban

BY ROB EDWARDS
ENVIRONMENT EDITOR

THE Scottish Government has been secretly trying to wriggle out of a proposed US ban on imports of salmon from fish farms that shoot seals, according to documents seen by the Sunday Herald.

Internal emails released under Freedom of Information law reveal that officials have been trying to persuade the US government that the £766 million salmon farming industry should be exempt from the ban. They have also been co-ordinating tactics with three other major fish-farming nations, Canada, Norway and Chile.

But, according to the latest statements from the US, Scottish salmon farming has not won exemption. The industry has been officially listed along with hundreds of other fishing operations worldwide as being covered by the ban.

The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is proposing to ban imports from fishing industries that kill marine mammals in 2022. The aim is to apply the same animal protection standards to foreign fisheries as in the US.



Fish farmers in Scotland have shot over 800 seals in the last seven years

Photograph: Patrick Glover

But fish farmers in Scotland have shot over 800 seals in the last seven years, including 49 in 2017. They are licensed by the Government to kill the animals to prevent them from attacking and eating salmon. If the seal killing continues, the Scottish caged salmon industry could lose a very lucrative foreign market. Exports to the US in 2017 were worth £193 million.

Emails released to an anti-fish-farming campaigner show officials from the Government's Marine Scotland agency repeatedly suggesting that "farmed salmon should be classed as an exempt fishery" by the US. They argued it was very different from fish farming in the US.

But salmon from 150 fish farms in Scotland is included in a long list of fisheries to which the ban will apply published by NOAA this month. According to critics, this means that the Scottish Government attempts to exempt fish farming have not succeeded.

"I'm pleased the Scottish Government's secret lobbying of Trump's administration to weaken protection for seals has failed," said Green environment spokesperson Mark Ruskell MSP.

"This was a desperate attempt to prop up the bad practice of an industry that is failing in its responsibilities to protect the environment. The control of seals by slaughter is unnecessary."

He added: "If the Government wants to avoid the collapse of a huge market for Scottish salmon, it must change the law to ban the intentional killing of seals by fish farms."

Don Staniford, the campaigner who obtained the emails and now runs a new group called Scottish Salmon Watch, described seal shooting by salmon farmers as a "national disgrace". He pointed out that some fish-

THE KILLING SEAS



Seals killed under licence by Scottish fish farms

2017	49
2016	65
2015	73
2014	92
2013	119
2012	212
2011	241
Total	851

Source: Scottish Government licences

"By licensing seal shooting our Government gives fish farmers in Scotland an unfair financial advantage over their American counterparts who invest large sums of money making their farms sea-mammal friendly," said the charity's John Robins.

"It makes me very angry that we need the American government to protect Scottish seals."

The Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation, which represents fish farmers, stressed it was committed to protecting fish welfare. "Our goal is to reduce the number of predator seals shot to zero while still being able to protect our own fish stocks from predator attack," said outgoing chief executive, Scott Landsburgh.

"Direct action towards seals is an act of last resort and used only when all other methods have been exhausted. The activity is licensed by the Scottish Government and undertaken by trained experts."

He added: "We would expect the Scottish Government to work with other aquaculture jurisdictions including Canada and Norway to understand how the US rules will apply and discuss the matter with the US regulatory authority."

The Scottish Government confirmed it had been "raising awareness of the regulations and their potential impact on Scottish seafood exports with Scotland's aquaculture sector".

A spokesperson said: "The Scottish Government is in regular dialogue with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the European Union around the future application of the US mammal regulations, including how these would interact with our seal licensing regime in order to ensure compliance going forward."

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